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Guy Wright

Fresh start in a jungle for The City's misfits

They cut a road seven miles into the South American rain forest and then made a clearing. Today if you visit that clearing in the jungle you will find a little band of misfits from the streets of San Francisco trying to start a new life.

You'll find a purse snatcher feeding pigs, a shoplifter hoeing corn, a transvestite driving a tractor, a prostitute and a couple of dope addicts in the sewing shed making their own clothes.

They are succeeding remarkably well, according to the Rev. Jim Jones, pastor of Peoples Temple on Geary Street and originator of this unusual experiment in human salvage.

"What I see is turning me into an environmental determinist," he said. "We take incorrigibles — people no one could handle. Down there they straighten themselves out. I don't know the explanation. With the dramatic change in environment comes a dramatic change in the person."

Life there is kibbutz-style. The transplanted San Franciscans live in cottages and eat in a messhall that they built themselves — built with lumber from the purpleheart trees they felled to make the clearing and then cut into boards with a sawmill they had brought along.

Three years ago the first contingent arrived. Now they have a septic tank sewage system, machine shop, school, church, rec hall. They grow corn, cassava, papaya, coconut. They raise pigs, 5,000 chickens and are introducing cattle.

"Everyone works but no one is forced," Jones said. "Pretty soon after they arrive the work ethic just makes a comeback. No one is forced to stay either. But not one person has requested to come home."

By no means have the exiles consigned themselves to jungle rot. They are cooled by the trade wind, and at night a blanket feels good. They can visit a nearby town, and some boys date native girls. By ham radio they maintain contact with the Peoples Temple here, which also sends them cassettes of selected TV shows.

Jones refers to the jungle outpost simply as "the agricultural project," which is how it began. Two years as a missionary in Brazil gave him a two-fold idea.

Just north of Brazil is the little nation of Guyana, once a British plantation colony. Jones persuaded the Guyana government to let him start a model farm to show the advantages of multi-crop agriculture in the tropics. He also wanted to use the farm as a haven where San Francisco's misfits could get away from their pressures. Guyanese officials were dubious, at first, but Pastor Jones is a persuasive man.

Today there are 130 problem people on the model farm and a staff of 21. The staff, which includes nine teachers, was recruited from career people who felt something was missing from their lives. The father figure was a high powered insurance executive. An MIT man handles engineering. A Baptist minister, at 103, is launching a new career.

The problem people, besides the usual losers from the street, include the embittered son of a CIA agent, a school arsonist, a boy who cuts off cats' heads and, the youngest, a 5-year-old rated as a genius and a sociopath.

Despite the claims of near-perfect success, no one has been sent home as rehabilitated. Jones doesn't see that as necessarily how the story ends. "We don't tell people their time is up," he said. "They are free to stay as long as they feel they should be there."

He told about a new arrival who woke up to the tropic dawn, the song of exotic birds, the soft kiss of the trade wind. The young man threw out his arms and shouted, "Man, the Fillmore has seen the last of me."

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